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# Away from it all in the Canaries

**Whether you're planning to sail across the Atlantic or just looking for some winter sun, the Canary Islands offer more than just tourist traps and expensive marinas. Tim Good helps dispel some of the myths**





As part of our long-term plans to get to Senegal and then onwards to Patagonia, we made for the Canaries. See *Sailing Today* [March 2019] for our passage via Brittany and Galicia.

For us, the Canaries conjured up

images of apartment blocks, hordes of tourists and expensive marinas. Without wanting to sound too snobby, we're looking for nature, anchorages and adventure, and so the Canaries was planned to be little more than a quick provisioning stop. Jump forwards 12 months and we're still here...

**PREVIOUS PAGE**  
Anchorage at Alagranza

**THIS PAGE**  
Heavily reefed in one of the acceleration zones (above); a tranquil anchorage (below)

In this article, we'll try to dispel a few myths we'd heard about the Canaries and share some of our adventures. The negatives we'd heard were: too few anchorages, too many tourists; bleak, barren landscapes; and challenging, stressful sailing. It turns out we were wrong on most scores as you will see...

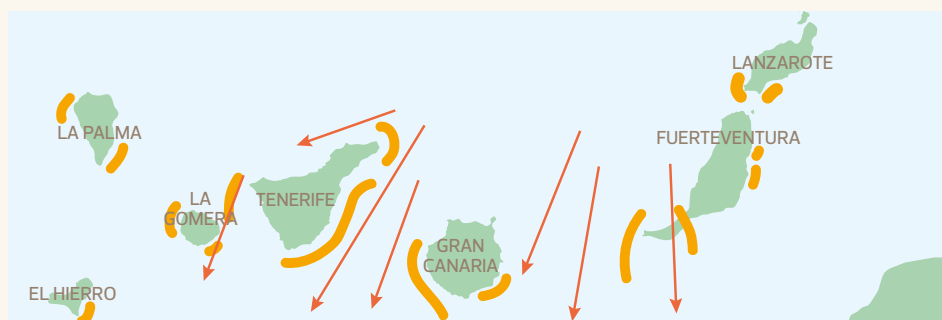
## The sailing

Sailing in the Canaries is diverse. We obviously cannot write this article without mentioning the acceleration zones – areas where the wind is often multiplied by a factor of two or three. They are well documented but also feared by many sailors. In reality they are nothing to really worry about since they're localised to a maximum of 5–15 miles and unlikely to build a dangerous sea.

In most of the acceleration zones you'll experience 20–30kt winds where the forecast is 10kt, but you'll pass through relatively quickly. When you reach them you'll see the change in sea state ahead, so reef early. In some cases they can be extreme. Off Gran Canaria we

experienced 65kt gusts but the sea state was more akin to a Force 5 in the UK. Just reef hard and enjoy the ride.

Between the islands, the sailing is glorious. The general forecasts from Predict Wind, Windy or Passage Weather are relatively accurate. In the lee of the islands you can often expect to be becalmed but an afternoon sea breeze can sometimes fill in. We anchored in the most picturesque of spots without a soul. Closer to resorts, things got busier, with windsurfers, motor boats and catamarans full of tourists blaring music in the same small space for a couple of hours before the peace once more descended in the evening. For the most part, sailing in the Canaries is glorious.



## Anchoring in the Canary Islands

Before we get into our adventures we felt it best to touch on the anchoring situation in the Canary Islands. There are plenty of really great anchorages but mostly people don't use them because they're not marked as anchorages or they're worried about it being too rocky. As such it means that you can find peaceful places to drop your hook and often be the only one there.

There are two islands north of Lanzarote that make particularly nice anchorages, namely Graciosa and Alagranza. The former is a perfect landfall after a long passage from Portugal. We arrived in darkness and woke up to an amazing volcanic wonderland. We landed on a deserted beach to find interesting plants, birds and rock formations, as though the lava had flowed from the volcano just yesterday.

It's important to note that the three islands north of Lanzarote are protected and you must apply to anchor there. It is free but you need to email medioambiente3@cabildodelanzarote.com prior to arriving.

Alagranza is the northernmost island and is a real beauty. However, it is a bird reserve and you must not land ashore. There are no facilities, water or provisions and we didn't see another boat during our time there. Just enjoy the crystal clear water and snorkelling. Pay close attention to lay your anchor on sand and not on one of the pristine reefs, which are home to many marine species.

There are many other nice anchorages and we'd recommend using a combination of Google Maps in Satellite mode, the phone app Navily, and your charts to choose interesting anchorages that 99 per cent of the other boats ignore.

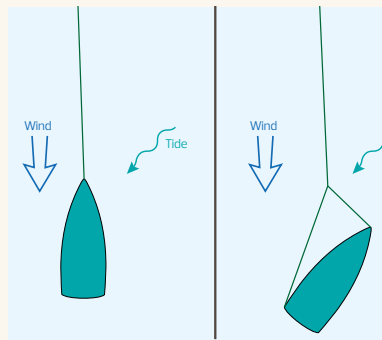
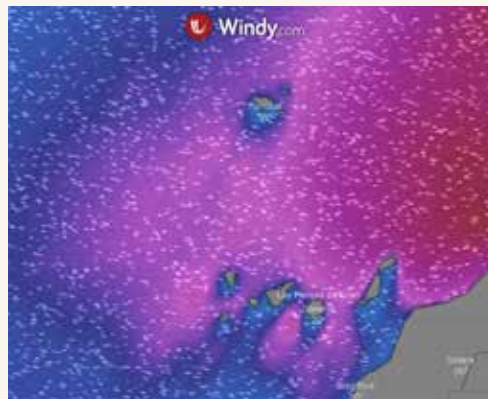
There are three techniques which we would recommend if you want to minimise your marina visits.

### Predict the swell

Firstly use the swell charts on windy.com or downloaded from another app like Offshore Predict Wind.

The swell is almost always caused by depressions from a long way off and you can predict its arrival easily.

Choose to be in a marina when it comes in and move back to anchorages when it drops off.



### Use an anchor bridle

This is a simple trick where you set your anchor and then let the boat settle. If you end up beam on to the swell then deploy a bridle attached with a rolling hitch to the chain, then lead it back to a stern cleat. Let out the chain until the boat swings round into the direction of the swell. It is easily adjusted just with the scope of chain. I apologise if I am teaching some of the readers to suck eggs, but we saw a lot of boats in strife, rolling about with no solution.

### Make or buy a flopper stopper

If you don't want your dinner to end up in your lap then get a flopper stopper. This is a simple trick of deploying a device off the boom into the water. It sinks when the boat rolls one direction and causes resistance when rolling the other. The net effect is a boat that doesn't gain momentum into a full-on roll. You can buy these or just make one easily enough. Just google Flopper Stopper.



BELOW  
Looking down on the clouds during a hike in La Palma

## Above the Clouds in La Palma

If you really want to get away from the crowds of tourists then simply avoid the coasts where the resorts are situated, particularly in the south of each Island where the sandy beaches are. The key is to pick a safe harbour and get inland. Public transport is excellent and car hire is exceptionally





cheap. It seems that 95 per cent of tourists will not venture inland. Every Island is fantastically varied and if you fancy a mountain hike, the temperature can drop by a number of degrees. All the islands have well marked trails, but Gran Canaria, El Hierro, La Palma and La Gomera in particular offer a labyrinth of walking trails from easy jaunts to multi-day adventures. The GR 131 (Grande Route) runs through the entire island chain.

We walked a small but spectacular section in La Palma called the Volcano Route, winding through dormant volcanoes and pine forests

along a toothlike ridge-line. High above the island are stunning views of La Palma and onwards towards La Gomera and Tenerife. This route is particularly well known for stargazing, owing to its lack of light pollution.

Leaving the boat in the local harbour of Tzacorte, we took a bus to our designated starting point. As we set off, disconcertingly skimpily clad runners whisked past us on the ascent. They were all in training for the internationally renowned Transvulcania trail running race, the. The scenery was beautiful and varied, from open pine forest to

**ABOVE**  
Spectacular sailing  
off Gran Canaria

walking in the reds, oranges and burnt blacks between the cones of small volcanoes. We ended up camping in a grassy glade of a well organised campsite. These 'recreational zones' are found on most of the islands and are free camping areas that provide a toilet, water, shower and even a safe place to make a fire. As we entered the cloud forest the next day, there was evidence of a huge fire that had spread through the island a couple of years earlier.

Thankfully the Canarian Pines are unique and has a special bark that make them particularly resilient to fire. Many were recovering with new shoots which made them look like a Poodles!

As we gained the ridge-line, the clouds cleared to reveal the details, colours and trees of the island below. That evening we cooked up couscous and ratatouille above the rim of the huge crater, miles in diameter. An unforgettable time was spent watching clouds rolling in and lapping up the sides of the enormous cliffs as the sun set.

We slept in a mountain refuge at around 2,000m and stargazed from the roof. Truly a magical experience and not to be missed.



## Cycling in El Hierro

We made the decision to carry full-size bicycles on board rather than folding bikes, as we really enjoy travelling in this way. However, many of the islands have a range of bicycles to rent and we would thoroughly recommend it. For those who think this sounds a little bit like hard work, then many companies offer E-Bikes for rent.

El Hierro is particularly spectacular to cycle around since it encompasses so many ecosystems and types of scenery in one island. During a single day we experienced desert, volcanos, pine forest, lush cloud rainforest and rolling flower meadows.

All the Canary Islands are relatively small, but with a surprisingly high altitude, rising steeply up to the sky, which can make cycling hard work. With a mixture of persuasion and foreign ignorance, we got our two bikes on a bus, knocking off an initial 800m climb. We planned a clockwise circumnavigation of the Island starting up in the pine forests and at the end of the day would be camping. The fun of camping is that you can end up anywhere, and that first night was spent on a bed of straw in an ancient goat cave, surrounded by little candles whose light glistened off the contoured wall. We practised how we were going to explain and



excuse why we were sheltered in the goat herder's cave if he were to appear (a coat resting on a stick suggested he might be back soon).

Cool in the day and warm at night, caves are a feature common to all the islands and have been used by the natives for over 2,000 years. The wild and volcanic environment of this isolated archipelago helped shape the distinctive culture and way of life of its inhabitants.

The following day was spent whizzing down well maintained roads, passing volcanos of all colours, magma fields, gnarled trees blown over by the strong winds – and an abandoned house-turned-art gallery of bizarre *objets trouvez*. With the intention to stop for a spot of lunch

### ABOVE

All the islands offer excellent cycling, as we discovered

### BELOW

A superb swimming hole with discreetly built steps into the sea

we came across a small village allegedly famed for healing waters. A nice hotel sat perched on the cliffs looking out towards the Island of La Palma, where an overindulgent lunch inadvertently turned into an overnight stay, but we took solace in the fact we had camped in a cave the night before.

We were now on the north side of the island, greener and more cloudy than the south, as with most of the Canary Islands. Cycling on, we discovered one of the island's beautiful *charcos*. These are wild swimming holes, tastefully installed using the natural volcanic landscape to create platforms and steps into the sea.

We were now back down at sea level, so we hopped on another bus, to cheat our way around another 500m ascent into what was historically the most populated area of the island. The lush rolling fields with wild flowers and cows were more akin to the Azores or Wales than the Canary Islands. It's a temperate and fertile area of the island, which receives a good deal of mist at night, wetting the soil just enough to grow crops and collect fresh water. This area was also out of the sight of the pirates who once roamed the coasts of the Canary Islands. We happened upon several ancient, abandoned villages to stroll around as we explored.

It took us three days to cycle around the island but you could probably do it in one, or stretch it out to five days if you so desired. The hotels are few and far between, as are other tourists. Perfect!



### Snorkelling & Scuba

How can we talk about the Canaries without mentioning the wonderful world beneath the waves! Whenever possible, we'll try to get in the water and see what is about. Invariably, quite a lot is going on. We're lucky enough to carry scuba diving equipment, but the snorkelling is equally as good without all the faff. Finding a good spot goes hand in hand with anchoring in places 'off the beaten track'. At the popular anchorages, most of the marine life has been scared away by jet skis, regular tourist boats and yachts unwilling to explore beyond their comfort zone.

Alegranza was particularly good, owing to the low number of boats that visit. The south of La Gomera has many secluded anchorages minus resorts of the like found in Tenerife, Gran Canaria and Lanzarote, so the marine life is also excellent. We had a breathtaking swim out to *Telamon*, a large, half-sunken wreck near the town of Arrecife. The boat sprung a leak in 1981 and the intention had been to ground it. However, it split apart and is now severely corroded but great to explore, with dramatic contrasts of light from within the hull.

For Scuba divers there are a numerous sites, including wreck dives, lava tubes, caves and reef diving. Head directly to the sleepy town of La Restinga, in El Hierro, for world-class diving. The harbour is so



clean and clear that there are resident turtles and an abundance of fish. In fact it's one of our favourite harbours in all the Canary Islands and you can enjoy swimming in it. We also dived there at night and during Emmie's first night dive, when huge Rays glided in front of our vision into and out of the darkness. Outside of the harbour is a large marine reserve, and a number of diving centres in the village can guide you on good boats with high-quality equipment. We particularly enjoyed going with a company called Meridiano Cero, operated by a lovely French couple. Offering diving and dive photography, they are well organised, very friendly and have immaculate kit.

We had planned to spend only a short amount of time in the Canary



#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim Good, grew up racing squibs and J/24s on the East Coast from Bridlington. He has ambitions to sail to Patagonia, Alaska and other high latitudes

Emmie is a successful artist and adventurer. She travels frequently in search of inspiration for her next exhibition



Islands, but we hadn't realised how extensive and diverse they were. The sailing is not as straightforward as some places in the world and lacks protected tributaries and rivers that you can tuck into. You can, however day sail between islands and experience a totally different microclimate within an hour, enjoy year-round warmth, crystal clear waters and partake of a multitude of activities on offer.

### Conclusions

As a sailing destination it is average. Don't get me wrong, it is satisfying to sail between the islands but the wind is variable and harbours are not very culturally interesting. However, on balance it is a fantastic area for cruising owing to the fantastic adventures to be had in such diverse landscapes.

For a cruising boat looking for an alternative to the Med, or aiming to cross the Atlantic, we would urge you to arrive early and set aside at least four months to enjoy all that each island has to offer. From our personal experience, I can assure you that you won't be disappointed.



### Golden Light over Gran Tarjal

The sun was setting over Gran Tarjal, a small village in Fuerteventura with Moroccan influences. As we arrived into a calm bay, a golden light, emphasised by Saharan sand in the air, stuck over the little town and highlighted the last tones on the buildings. Square houses stacked on top of each other made a moment that couldn't be missed. Emmie quickly got to work on a pre-prepared MDF board and, as the sun sank, little lights of houses highlighted windows and doors. This combined with the dramatic colours of the earth in the background and of course *Shadowfax* in the foreground, and we decided to anchor there for the night.

Emmie is lucky enough to be able to take her work with her as we travel. The paintings are sent back to the UK and then shown around the world in a number of galleries. [www.EmmieVB.com](http://www.EmmieVB.com)

